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SUBJECT: NEW FRENCH MINISTER FOR FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES;
RURAL AFFAIRS SHIFTED TO NEW MINISTRY

¶1. SUMMARY: President Nicolas Sarkozy reshuffled his government on June 23, 2009, replacing former Minister of Agriculture, Michel Barnier. Barnier led the UMP party list in the European Parliament elections and his departure was expected following the election. He is widely seen as France's candidate for a European Commissioner position. Former Junior Minister for European Affairs Bruno Le Maire replaces Barnier in the renamed Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries. Mr. Le Maire has held high-level political positions in several administrations but has no known experience in agriculture. His political savvy at the EU level and fluency in German indicate a desire by the French government to garner support for continuation of a strong Common Agricultural Policy. French farm groups cautiously welcomed the nomination. Sarkozy also shifted responsibility for rural affairs from the Agriculture Ministry to a new Rural Territories and Land Planning Ministry which will be headed by Michel Mercier. End summary

¶2. As Secretary of State for European Affairs since December 2008, Bruno Le Maire, aged 40, has been pivotal in rebuilding closer diplomatic ties between France and Germany which, according to analysts, had been cool since Sarkozy's election in May 2007. His fluency in German and strong connections to the political elite in Germany have some commentators mourning his departure from his European Affairs position, believing that strengthening the French-German axis is of high importance during the economic crisis.

¶3. While Mr. Le Maire has no agricultural background, he is an elected Deputy of a semi-rural constituency in Normandy. He was educated at the prestigious Ecole Nationale d'Administration, Paris Institute of Political Science and Ecole Normale Supérieure, where he majored in French literature. He subsequently worked at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the Directorate for Strategic Affairs, Security and Disarmament. He was an advisor to former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin in several capacities (when Mr. de Villepin was French Minister of Foreign Affairs (2002 - 2004) and then Minister of Interior (2004 - 2005)) rising to serve as Director of Cabinet for Prime Minister de Villepin (2005-2007). He joined the Sarkozy administration as Secretary of State for European Affairs in December 2008. Bruno Le Maire is married with two children.

¶4. French farm organizations welcomed Bruno Le Maire's nomination, but signaled they expect him to quickly address issues important to French agricultural producers, particularly the tension between milk prices and retailers' profit margins, an issue which brought French and European farmers into the streets during the recent Luxembourg Council on June 22.

¶5. Michel Mercier, aged 62, is the new French Minister for Rural Territories and Land Planning. An experienced politician at the local and national level, he is also a member of the Board of the French branch of the Aspen Institute. Michel Mercier graduated in law and political science and teaches local finance and law at the Lyon University. He is married and has five children.

¶6. Comment: Bruno Le Maire will head a streamlined Ministry, and we expect the development of the food industry and emphasis on food safety to be significant priorities for the new Minister. Some analysts perceive the separation of the important rural affairs component (responsible for distributing the equivalent of 1 billion euro in EU funding) from the traditional MinAg activities as a possible move toward the dissolution of a Ministry of Agriculture in the medium/long term. The food component could shift to the Ministry of Economy while productive agriculture could fall under either the Ministry of Ecology or Industry. Bruno Le Maire's political experience at the EU level and his close ties with Germany could help France garner Member State support for maintaining a strong, subsidized EU farm policy after 2013.

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